# 4.18.2008 - Earth Day

America needs coal. This may sound like a strange declaration to make, especially in the midst of a national celebration of Earth Day, but, here in West Virginia, we have known this for generations.

Coal is the most abundant natural energy resource in the U.S. It generates half of our electricity from fifteen-hundred power plants. Also importantly, experts predict that, given anticipated spikes in oil, gas, and electricity prices in the foreseeable future, coal can be expected to remain one of the most economical fuels of choice for many years to come.

While I agree that we must find a solution to our Nation’s energy problems that includes more renewable energy sources and less carbon dioxide production, I take great offense at the radical notion that the answer is to give up on coal. To do so would be to risk undermining our economy and our security, not to mention dramatically altering the American way of life.

What we really need to do, rather than dump coal from our energy mix, is to put outdated energy prejudices aside and craft realistic solutions to the production and release of carbon dioxide.

One part of the solution is to invest more in a process commonly referred to as carbon capture and sequestration. This process limits emissions by capturing carbon dioxide before it goes up the smokestack and then burying it underground. While it may sound to some like an idea that is far beyond our abilities and equally beyond the bounds of good sense, it is not such an outlandish idea at all.

The technology to achieve it already exists. In fact, capture and sequestration is already happening.

Three major projects around the world are currently putting millions of tons of carbon dioxide below the Earth’s surface each year. A Norwegian oil and gas company has been safely pumping carbon dioxide deep below the North Sea floor since 1996, with no evidence of any carbon dioxide leaking out.

Moreover, although few people are aware, the U.S. has been injecting vast quantities of carbon dioxide underground for several decades. Over 45 million tons are being used each year for a process known as “enhanced oil recovery,” in which carbon dioxide is used to flush out oil and natural gas that is trapped under the surface. This process is used on old oil and gas wells from which efficiently recoverable reserves, using common methods, have been extracted. Pumping the carbon dioxide into the ground makes the old wells productive and economical again, which in turn improves our domestic supplies of these fuels and lessens the pressure to

drill in sensitive natural areas.

As economies around the world compete for limited energy supplies and pressure mounts to deal with the economic and environmental consequences of rapid energy production, it is clear that the U.S. needs to take a more aggressive approach to develop full-scale capture and storage projects. This is a necessity if we are going to make a serious dent in our emissions levels. As a longtime advocate of research into advanced coal technologies, I will continue to support federally funded research to help identify ways to burn coal efficiently and in more environmentally friendly ways, and carbon capture and sequestration technologies are a vital part of that effort.

Throughout history, our Nation has capitalized on its incredible wealth of knowledge to overcome some of the world’s greatest challenges. Our forefathers began mining coal in West Virginia’s hills and powered the industrial revolution that led our Nation to greatness. Let us do so again. If we truly want Earth Day to be more than an annual day of reflection, we need to implement realistic environmental and energy policies and encourage other nations, particularly developing nations like China and India, to follow our lead.

Coal has certainly been a critical fuel in West Virginia’s heritage and America’s history. If we plan and invest accordingly, coal will continue to play a critical role in the Earth’s energy future. Pursuing the widespread deployment of carbon capture -- a safe, well-understood, and practical technology -- is the perfect place to start.